

# Lateral

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## Feelings, Fascism, and Futures

by Suzanne Enzerink | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

**ABSTRACT** The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed some of the most glaring inequalities within nations and across the globe. While the disruption caused by the pandemic has given rise to hopes for a cultural reset to address these structures of inequality—captured compellingly by Arundhati Roy in her vision of the pandemic as a portal—the sediments of inequality have proven hard to erode. In this contribution, I explore this regressive impulse by honing in on the affect of restraint. While restraint is not ordinarily characterized as such, in the pandemic it has been a defining feature of our lives. However, it was not afforded equally. I begin by showing how restraint has become racialized, serving as a political tool to suppress protests, notably Black Lives Matter. I then move to show how globally, too, there has been an imbalance in who is—and what countries are—expected to practice nonintervention, linking both domestic and international uses of restraint to these preexisting structures of inequality. I end by proffering a vision for how, despite all these obstacles, the pandemic has also offered ways to bypass the state and form new social formations.

**KEYWORDS** affect, fascism, race, mutual aid, pandemic, white supremacy

## Introduction

How can the pandemic be a portal, if the histories that foreclose radical possibilities and resist reorganization are so present?<sup>1</sup> In her essay “The End of White Innocence,” part of her acclaimed 2020 book, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Cathy Park Hong reads fantasies about perpetual childhood and innocence as a form of white privilege:

The legacy of Holden Caulfield’s arrested development has dominated the American culture industry, from the films of Steven Spielberg and Wes Anderson to the fiction of Jonathan Safran-Foer. In the mid-aughts, there was even a short-lived movement called New Sincerity, where artists and writers thought that it would be a radical idea to *feel*. ‘To feel’ entailed regressing to one’s own childhood, when there was no Internet and life was much purer and realer. Though they prized authenticity above all else, they stylized their work in a vaguely-repellent faux-naïf aesthetic that dismissed politics for shoe-gazing self-interest.<sup>2</sup>

The passage is worth quoting in full because it so perfectly encompasses both recursive obsessions with protecting innocence thought to be inherent in childhood and the undeniable white privilege inherent in such fantasies. Culture in the United States is at once driven by a desire to revert to a simpler past and the total erasure of the violence that

this past entailed for everyone who was not white. Trump's dog whistle to "Make America Great Again" is the most jarring embodiment of this new American fascism. In its logic, "he is just a boy" got Dylann Roof an order of Burger King, courtesy of the police, after massacring Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina<sup>3</sup> while Trayvon Martin was murdered by a police officer walking home from a convenience store, because Black boys can never be boys and are always men.<sup>4</sup> Whiteness, conversely, can afford to only invoke feeling flexibly, for aesthetic purposes like Wes Anderson or to track individual mitigating circumstances. Until Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah labeled him "A Most American Terrorist" in her Pulitzer Prize-winning essay,<sup>5</sup> Roof was described as mentally disturbed, an emanation of, as his elementary school principal worded it to Ghansah, "how vulnerable and precarious self-esteem is for white, working-class people in this society." Young Dylann, this narrative goes, was traumatized from a young age on by his lack of economic privilege, or the form of privilege expected to come with whiteness. He was made to *feel* his exclusion, certain writers suggested. Not, emphatically, a terrorist. Yet these affective excuses found no mirror in Roof himself, who showed no remorse or any form of emotion during his trial, even as his lawyers continuously invoked his allegedly corrupted innocence (his economic marginalization and the unconfirmed rape of a family member by Black men) and feelings of inadequacy.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, for racialized Americans who are always aware of being othered, even if nothing happens, feeling race is not a choice, a privilege, or a defense strategy. It is a given. As Sara Ahmed writes, "being emotional" has historically been constructed as a "characteristic of some bodies and not others," an equation often informed—at least in part—by race and its ties to a perceived national identity.<sup>7</sup> Race and affect, in other words, are mutually constituted, a realization that the field of affect studies has centered in recent years building on the work of scholars such as Ahmed and Jose Esteban Muñoz.<sup>8</sup> This has constant effects on the interior and exterior lives of people of color and those marginalized along parallel axes. As Hong writes, it is not the racist "incident itself but the stress of its anticipation" that leads to a state of forever suspension of a next injury, the titular minor feelings.<sup>9</sup> While *Minor Feelings* was completed before the pandemic accelerated, the rise of anti-Asian sentiment will only have intensified this forever anticipation. The roots of American fascism lie in this divergent understanding of who gets to feel, of who gets to be innocent, and who has to await. It is fascism and resistance against it that also mark how the COVID-19 pandemic played out in the US and abroad. As a scholar located in Beirut, what has stood out to me are the similarities in how the pandemic unraveled, despite vast differences in overall national context and financial standing. Access to capital, in both cases, formed the primary shield, an access itself determined by privilege along the lines of race, gender, nationality, and class. To make this point, I compare the US and Lebanese contexts as examples in this essay.

I open my contribution with this musing about racialized feeling for the generative segue it provides to the form of affect I will focus on for this forum on affect's radical possibilities: restraint. The past informs the present. While it may appear as though new affective formations have manifested during this last, unprecedented year, in fact they are subterranean formations and sentiments brought to the surface, for better and for worse. The same environment that created Dylann Roof, that is built on the protection of white

feeling and property, today seeks to foreclose any opportunity for the pandemic to be a portal, as Arundhati Roy phrased the potentialities of the moment.<sup>10</sup>

## Racialized Restraint and the Pandemic

Restraint is not customarily thought of as an affect, but rather the policing of it. Nevertheless, it is the nerve center of our feelings. Being forced or choosing to hide, or hold in emotions generates new intensities of them, while at the same time engendering a solidarity between all those who subscribe to the imperative to exercise it. Moving to recognize restraint as a central enactment of affect fits with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's call for scholars to move away from focusing disproportionately on negative emotions. Focusing on race and affect, he writes that "racial domination produces the entire emotional gamut, hate and love, disgust and pleasure, and aversion and empathy."<sup>11</sup> Restraint, I argue, is another category produced by and routed through racial domination. Before suggesting how radical pathways might emerge, I therefore look at how restraint has been wielded throughout the pandemic and its particular racial contours.

In the midst of the pandemic, restraint was demanded from all. We had to hold back the impulse to hold close those dear to us, stop ourselves from giving into a deep desire to finally hug our best friend again, to see our ill relative, meet our new grandchild. We had to stop ourselves from selfishly hoarding all the toilet paper and hand sanitizer from the shelves, and from imperiling essential service workers to satisfy late-night cravings or the desire to dine out. An alarming if not surprising amount of white people—with varying degrees of success—also had to "restrain" themselves from blaming Chinese/Americans or, in a homogenizing rhetoric, Asian/Americans at large for all of these things. On Twitter and other forms of social media, microaggressions and overt aggressions about the provenance of the virus began to circulate; advice rubrics such as Slate's Dear Prudence suddenly had to field questions < <https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/03/dear-prudence-coronavirus-straining-marriage.html> > about strained familial relations<sup>12</sup>; and reports of anti-Asian violence, including in allegedly liberal cities, skyrocketed. For a lot of white people, then, their knee-jerk response was to process the threat of the virus through the lens of preexisting stereotypes about subpar public health standards and eating habits in China. Trump's designation of "the China virus" was oil on a fire already aflame.

Yet restraint was also always racialized in another way. When in the middle of the pandemic, Americans of color and their white allies publicly advocated for their right to equality, those in power quickly figured it as an excess of emotion. Their demand for radical change was figured not as a rational demand but as a chaotic outburst that imperiled public health and safety. As then-President Trump claimed, "cases started to rise among young Americans shortly after demonstrations, which you know very well about, which presumably triggered a broader relaxation of mitigation efforts nationwide."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Black Lives Matter protesters were reprimanded for their *lack* of restraint. This has been a recurring motif within the status quo's interpretations of demands for racial equality, yet a demonstrably false one. In a 1993 interview, novelist Toni Morrison was asked to comment on the explosion of affect that came into view in the aftermath of

the Rodney King trial and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. Morrison, however, flipped the question. "What struck me is the restraint they showed. Not the spontaneity, the restraint. They waited for justice and it didn't come. They didn't do a thing. That's amazing."<sup>14</sup> Black Lives Matter and other radical calls for reform are not sudden, but the culmination of decades, centuries of justice denied. The fact that the pandemic has disproportionately affected racialized Americans lent even more urgency and reason for protests that addressed not just police brutality, but state brutality. Even former president Barack Obama seemed to misunderstand just how much restraint has characterized social movements in the United States. In December 2020, he dismissed the use of "snappy" slogans like "defund the police," arguing that these alienate the masses and impede robust social change. "Do you want to actually get something done, or do you want to feel good among people you already agree with?" he continued.<sup>15</sup> As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and others quickly retorted, "people did it his way" already: they went to meetings, liaised with precinct representatives, sought recourse through the system.<sup>16</sup> It did not work.

Instead, during the pandemic, people of color in the United States and those in socio-economically vulnerable positions across the globe, have been hit hardest by the virus. Those in power did not react. Initially, only Brazil committed to granting priority vaccination to Indigenous populations, even though this group and other racialized populations were disproportionately affected everywhere.<sup>17</sup> In recent months, other nations such as Canada < <https://www.fnha.ca/about/news-and-events/news/indigenous-people-are-a-high-priority-to-receive-covid-19-vaccinations> ><sup>18</sup> and Australia < <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/getting-vaccinated-for-covid-19/covid-19-vaccines-indigenous> ><sup>19</sup> finally followed suit. Black Lives Matter, too, then could not but draw attention to this unequal health outcome across race as another form of racial violence embedded in the state, only to have the topsy turvy logic of racism transform them from victims to culprits in the media. How different things looked for white Americans, who displayed a spectacular lack of communal care. White Americans, faces distorted with anger, mouths agape, banged on the windows as they peered into the Ohio State Capitol demanding business be reopened.<sup>20</sup> The scene drew comparisons to a frame from George Romero's zombie film *Dawn of the Dead*, where capitalist zombies demand 24/7 access to consumer goods.<sup>21</sup> They were not scolded for their lack of restraint. They were instead exercising quintessential American values, the right to free speech in order to demand individual liberties, per the political status quo and the media.

In Lebanon, too, the abstract need for restraint and the privilege of being able to afford it was fragmented along lines of class and nationality. Under the weight of a crippling financial crisis, many Lebanese businesses toppled when the first mandatory lockdown stopped even the already drastically reduced clientele from coming. Businesses therefore opposed a second lockdown in November—"it will throw thousands of workers on the street," the head of the general labor union said—and many simply did not comply.<sup>22</sup> Restraint, in this case, was too costly, and only those with homes in the mountains could afford to isolate and withdraw from public life. For the thousands of Palestinians and Syrians living in camps throughout the country, often in crowded and unsanitary conditions without access to running water or soap—the staples of all COVID-19 hygienic measures—this was never even a choice. In the aftermath of the devastating Beirut Port explosion on

August 4, 2020, all residents suddenly had no choice. In the absence of a state response, they had to pick up the rubble themselves, sweeping broken glass from the streets and tending to the wounded. It also shattered any sense of obligation to the state to comply with the call for restraint and restricted movement; residents erupted in anger at the corruption and neglect that had left 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in the heart of the city. If the state does not care for you, how can you respect it?

## Global Infrastructures of Care

How can the pandemic be a portal, with all these immovable sediments not just at home but abroad, too? Today's global political landscape is marked by new forms of imperialism, by thinly-veiled military interventions that exist to consolidate economic interests. Here, too, restraint is needed, a commitment to an absence of intervention unless absolutely imperative for public health or safety. Radical change can only come about globally, with acknowledgement of the devastation that the United States has wrought at home and abroad because it violated this principle of restraint. Joe Biden, in a "sweet" Thanksgiving message to Americans to acknowledge the hardships of the pandemic, fell short. After celebrating the restraint, resilience, and sacrifices made by Americans under COVID, Biden concluded that "the twenty-first century," as he forcefully said, "will be an American century."<sup>23</sup> Paired with his post-victory mantra of "America is back," what seems to be on the political horizon is not a break with or interrogation of US imperial interventions. It is a continuation of them, with all the devastating effects this entails for populations across the globe. For Palestinians, it is continued and increasingly aggressive Israeli settlement of their homelands. For the Lebanese, it might be a withholding of aid until the government includes only American-friendly parties, no matter whether these parties have themselves robbed the Lebanese commoners blind ever since the civil war. The state, in other words, will continue its cold calculus at home and abroad.

This is not to say that radical affective alliances are impossible. We have a long lineage before us of activists, writers, and thinkers who imagined futures built around a collectivity of feeling. As Audre Lorde noted, "our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge."<sup>24</sup> Restraint in the accumulation of resources has been a foundational tenet of social welfare. Restraint in extraction is the only way we might still save the ecological futures of our globe. Both the forced isolation of the pandemic and the necessarily communal nature of battling this virus have provided space to consider how we can make the communal good part of our everyday practice. The infrastructure built by the collective embrace of masking and staying home, seemingly small individual actions with nevertheless sizable collective effects, can become an infrastructure of equality and common care. What is crucial, as Lauren Berlant already noted in 1999, is that affective experience translates to concrete action. "What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation," she asked, "when feeling *good* becomes evidence of justice's triumph?"<sup>25</sup> Heartwarming stories of solidarity, neighborliness, and unexpected friendships, can provide momentary relief from the badgering of bad news that this pandemic has wrought, a sense of connection even, but such encounters in themselves

cannot form the basis of meaningful change. Radical affect, if you will, has to be made material.

Will the pandemic be a portal, when both the necessity of restraint and these historical obstacles make the path forward narrow? Dean Spade's new book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* offers a model here. Mutual aid, Spade urges, is a path to reimagine community and power that can form an alternative to the self-destructive course we have been on, which Spade typifies as "intensive, uneven suffering followed by species extinction."<sup>26</sup> Mutual aid, Spade notes, when broken down to its molecules is survival work, spearheaded by community members caring for their vulnerable neighbors. When this survival work is "in conjunction with social movements demanding transformative change," we get to a praxis.<sup>27</sup>

We see this in the United States in many local initiatives, where neighbors come together to fill the gaps left by a negligent state. In Long Beach, California, for example, community members founded a mutual aid network, LB United < <https://www.lbunited.com/> >, after several local food banks closed down. At current, they provide both information and targeted aid to a wide range of constituencies, from veterans to the elderly, all under the rubric of "solidarity not charity." Initiatives like this have popped up all over the country, both informally between neighbors and through grassroots networks replete with websites and collaborative planners.

In Lebanon, several of these initiatives have also manifested, first amidst deepening poverty caused by the currency collapse in 2019, and after that both during the pandemic and in the aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020. One of my students co-founded *ThisIsLeb* < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDrvRorhoZe/> >, a friend-run organization that solicits and distributes food and basic necessities to those affected by the explosion. *Khaddit Beirut* < <https://khadditbeirut.com/> >, a collaboration between academics, activists, experts, and community members, has taken it upon itself to draw up an entire roadmap for how Lebanese society might be salvaged from what at current seems never-ending corruption and decline. From healthcare to material reconstruction, Khaddit translates the desire for change into concrete material goals.

## Representing Restraint

In closing, another question has weighed on my mind, too, these days. How can we make visible the emotional toll that restraint has had? How do we quantify emotions that could not be shown, or that could not be shared in their customary way due to the isolation of the pandemic? From funerals to births, foundational life experiences took place in small circles. How can we give meaning to, index, begin to track the affective dimensions of this all? Ronak K. Kapadia's concept of *warm data*, a term he borrows from artist Mariam Ghani, helps us begin to imagine a possible route. While Kapadia introduces the concept in the context of the forever war, the *longue durée* of US war making in the global Asias, warm data's emphasis on using cold bureaucracies as the basis for insurgent creative work is especially germane to the COVID-19 pandemic. Warm data, Kapadia notes, forms a

“reparative feminist strategy that poetically limns the fissures, failures, and absences in already-forgotten US archives,” in this case not of military bureaucracy, but public health infrastructure.<sup>28</sup> It is a way to recenter the perspectives of those most directly affected, those recorded by drones or now CT scans, who end up as just a disembodied entry in massive archives. We have the lists of names of the hundreds of thousands perished. Every day, new numbers track the latest infections—age, race/ethnicity, sex, location. What drew me to this forum on affect is the possibility to give body to these abstract indexes, to reinscribe and recenter lived experience into this narrative.

The most compelling efforts to do these have been necessarily very intimate, an antidote to the cold calculus of government data. In the United States, the Twitter account [FacesOfCovid](https://twitter.com/FacesOfCOVID) < <https://twitter.com/FacesOfCOVID> > performs this work. “They were more than a statistic,” the account statement reads. Every day, the account posts dozens of obituaries, anecdotes, memorials, of those who died, often submitted directly by their family members. Art, too, can fill this gap. Lebanese Canadian artist Carol Mansour’s conceptual art is another way to humanize, give warmth to these statistics. Mansour’s “Covid-eo diary < [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_nHnsa977eM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nHnsa977eM) > ” takes us through the artist’s life in a Beirut closed down amidst the pandemic. On the street, she encounters a group of women, playing a game of socially-distanced charades. The category: “dreams that won’t be fulfilled because of corona.” The answers include “flying” and “getting a PhD.” While the women laugh, the quiet heartbreak dominates.



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Carol Mansour's *COVID-eo Diary* (2020) shows a group of Beirutis sitting outside, socially distanced, playing a game of charades. Courtesy of Daraj Media.

This motif continues in Mansour's increasingly desperate need for human contact as she continues to obey the continuously-extending lockdown. She goes to a cafe to pick up a bottle of wine in a makeshift drive-through, and muses about how she dreads wearing a bra again. Most of all, the project chronicles Mansour's hopes and fears as she is navigating a city pushed further to the precipice by the virus. In Lebanon, even full restraint will not solve the crises that predate COVID-19. In locales where government support is absent at the worst or fragmentary at best, even the most committed radical collectivities might not suffice. Nevertheless, Mansour's greatest fear is one echoed across the globe: that we will have learnt nothing, and that things will go back to normal.

## Conclusion

Only the type of radical affectivities shared in this forum offer a glimmer of hope, and the only way to fulfill their promise is to persevere even amidst bleak historical precedents and government normalization. The famous 4 Non Blondes song that Mansour incorporates in full perhaps captures best the collective and necessarily quotidian nature of such change: "I pray/ Oh my God do I pray/ I pray every single day/ for revolution."









## Notes

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